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Terrorist TV? *S.F. broadcaster forced to drop Hezbollah's Al-Manar TV network after State Department labels it "terrorist"*

By Camille T. Taiara

Jamal Dajani understands the importance of honest, direct communication between the United States and the Middle East better than most.

"People cannot afford to only learn about the Middle East from sound bites," Dajani, director of Middle Eastern programming at LinkTV, told the *Bay Guardian*. "We cannot just rely on what Washington tells us, or on getting our news from Fox."

It was with this in mind that Dajani launched *Mosaic: World News from the Middle East* out of LinkTV's studio on Battery Street in downtown San Francisco in the month after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center.

The program assembles news from a wide spectrum of Middle Eastern TV networks with the goal of showing how different sectors – official government channels, independents like Aljazeera, conservative Islamist stations, and Israeli outlets among them – cover the issues of the day. Its name attests to the vast diversity of viewpoints found in the Arab world and stands as a challenge to the more simplistic, monolithic portrait often presented in the mainstream U.S. media.

Mosaic airs three times a day on both Dish Network channel 9410 and DirecTV channel 375 and, as such, is available to 25 million households across the country. But *Mosaic* – the only national program of its kind – has been suffering from a conspicuous gap in its coverage these days because it was forced to drop the Al-Manar network, a well-known Lebanese satellite TV network financed by Hezbollah

(a jihadist group that has also sponsored terrorist activities).

In December the U.S. State Department placed Al-Manar on its Terrorist Exclusion List (TEL), a roster authorized by the USA PATRIOT Act that carries looser designation criteria than the better-known Foreign Terrorist Organizations list.

"We placed Al-Manar on the list based on its incitement of terrorist activities," State Department spokesperson Lou Finter told us.

When asked whether State had ever placed any other media outlets on one of its terrorist lists, Finter argued that many terrorist groups engage in media activities, but he admitted under further questioning that no TV network had been designated as a terrorist organization prior to Al-Manar.

"Companies broadcasting [Al-Manar's] signal are not subject to penalties," he added.

Officially, being on the TEL bears repercussions only for immigrants, who can be deported from the United States or barred from entering in the first place if they belong to or are "associated" with an organization named on the list. Noncitizens who recruit members, solicit funds, or provide material support, either directly or indirectly, to a TEL organization face similar consequences.

Yet in the current political climate, it's tantamount to being blacklisted. GlobeCast, the international satellite-feed provider that supplied Al-Manar to U.S. networks, stopped carrying Al-Manar within 24 hours of the State Department's announcement.

“Al-Manar may have opinions a lot of people don’t agree with, but that’s not the issue,” Dajani argued. Consistently rated among the Middle East’s top 10 most-watched networks and especially popular among conservative Shiites, Al-Manar “is one of the few that represents an Islamist viewpoint,” he said. “I sure want to know what they’re saying.”

Indeed, the U.S. government itself certainly understands the importance of monitoring Arab media. As freelance documentary producer Mike Nichoson discovered, some White House staffers rely on Dajani’s *Mosaic* to do just that.

Last July, Nichoson spotted a bookcase full of *Mosaic* videotapes at the White House Office of Global Communication – an office that “is involved in developing strategies to counter what the White House considers is ‘negative propaganda’ about the U.S. in the global media,” he explained via e-mail. A staffer there told him they “watch [*Mosaic*] every day.”

State’s Finter explained that standing policy prevented him from commenting on the rationale behind placing Al-Manar on the TEL. All he would say was, “The action itself had nothing to do with free speech, but it had everything to do with Al-Manar’s terrorist activities.” And the State Department could, presumably, have good reason for concern that the rest of us simply aren’t privy to.

But that’s not how Dajani sees it. From his perspective, Al-Manar’s classification as a terrorist organization has everything to do with the First Amendment – and hypocrisy.

“Even in countries that we say need reform towards democracy, people can get news from [more than 130] satellite channels – including from Europe and the United States,” Dajani said, adding that so far, Al-Hurra – a satellite channel financed by the U.S. government and broadcast to the Middle East from Virginia – “has been allowed to operate freely in most Middle Eastern countries.” (Ironically, Al-Hurra isn’t available in the United States, either.)

Dajani noted that U.S. networks broadcast footage from terrorist cells all the time. “Bin Laden is the most famous terrorist in the world,” Dajani said. “[Yet] U.S. networks repeat the bin Laden tapes over and over” and have aired clips of beheadings carried out by some of the most vicious terrorist cells in Iraq.

It’s hard to fathom how anything that Al-Manar puts out could do worse. Indeed, the U.S. government

is currently embroiled in a standoff with European Union member states – France foremost among them – on whether the E.U. should define Al-Manar’s patron as a terrorist organization.



Gagged: *Mosaic* producer Jamal Dajani said his program — a pioneer in bridging the gap between the United States and the Arab world — is missing an important perspective ever since the feds blacklisted Al-Manar TV.

Photo: Lori Spears - www.lorispears.com

“This is a difficult issue because Hezbollah has military operations that we deplore, but Hezbollah is also a political party in Lebanon,” one European official told the *New York Times* for a Feb. 17 front-page story on whether to engage or isolate the organization. Hezbollah also has nonmilitary branches that provide social services to many Lebanese, especially in poor Shiite-majority areas.

Many European leaders prefer to encourage groups like Hezbollah to participate in the political process rather than rely on violence to get their point across. The United States, on the other hand, has opted to cut off Hezbollah – and, now, Al-Manar.

“With this action, you have the U.S. controlling what kind of information people can see or cannot see,” Dajani said. “If I’m missing one of the stations, I can’t give you the full picture.... I don’t believe the saying that what you don’t know can’t hurt you. It’s the opposite that’s true: what you don’t know *will* hurt you.”